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WILLIAM T SHERMAN AND THE CLAUSEWITZIAN TRINITY

CORE COURSE TWO ESSAY

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In March of 1864, William T. Sherman assumed command of the Union forces fighting in the western theater of operations. Up to that point, his military record was mixed, with a number of limited successes at First Manassas, Shiloh and Vicksburg as well as stinging failures at Chickasaw Bluffs and Missionary Ridge. Yet, lacking any better candidate, Grant called on the tall, peripatetic Sherman to continue operations in the west while he assumed command of Union operations in the east.

For the next 10 months, Sherman wrote a new chapter in the history of warfare. He brought a war of terror to the people and the interior of the confederacy. Vilified in the south, horrified in the north, Sherman waged a campaign against Atlanta, Savannah and the Carolinas that inspires controversy to this day. Decried as brutal and vicious, his military operations invited condemnation along the lines of John Bell Hood, who exclaimed that Sherman "... transcends, in studious and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war ..." (Marsalek, p. 285).

To his critics, Sherman was little more than a war criminal, whose excesses deserve condemnation rather than study. His operational style of fighting outside of the norms of accepted warfare should be denounced for its violence and brutality. To his supporters, Sherman was nothing less than a "fighting prophet" (Lewis, title). Understanding the true nature of warfare in the 19th century, he was the first American practitioner of "modern" war, a method which pushed beyond the convention of opposing armies meeting on open fields for decisive battles. Sherman took war from the battlefield to the factory, from the soldier to the civilian.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the key elements of Sherman's operations in 1864-1865 against the Clausewitzian ideology of the paradoxical trinity. Should Sherman face reproach for fighting "outside the box", for expanding the scale and scope of 19th century warfare? Or, should he be carefully studied for fighting a war which "rather closely approached its true character" (Clausewitz, p. 573). On reflection, one is led to the conclusion that Sherman illustrates a style of warfare approaching the Clausewitzian ideal of "war in practice", warfare which maintains a delicate harmony among the three tendencies of the trinity, "like an object suspended between three magnets" (Clausewitz, p. 89).

### The Strategy of Sherman

To understand Sherman's warfighting style, one must review his operational strategy. By 1864, both the Gettysburg and Vicksburg campaigns were over, and the inevitable strangulation of the South had begun. The confederacy, no longer able to mount an operational offensive, was holding at the edges of the "Old South", intent on fighting a protracted defensive campaign. Focused on the destruction of Lee's army in the east, Grant had instructed Sherman to "move against Johnston's army (in the west), break it up, and get into the interior as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources". Most generals of that time would interpret that as a force-oriented mission, centered on the defeat of Johnston's army in a decisive battle or a prolonged series of engagements. As part of that operation, key railroad lines, supply depots and armories would be destroyed to fulfill the latter part of the mission, but only as a corollary to the defeat of the army.

Instead, Sherman drove through the heart of the confederacy, aimed at Atlanta,

Savannah, and then through the Carolinas, executing a campaign characterized by maneuver, destruction, foraging and subjugation of the civilian population. It was a scorched earth campaign executed with military precision, clear objectives and boundless enthusiasm by William Sherman, a campaign he visualized even before the outbreak of war. It was a campaign which clearly harmonized the paradoxical trinity of the people, the government and the army.

### Sherman and the People

To Clausewitz, the first dominant tendency of war is "... primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which... mainly concerns the people (Clausewitz, p. 89). One of the underlying themes of Clausewitz's is that in the era prior to Napoleon war had "... ceased to be in harmony with the spirit of the times" (Clausewitz, p. 590). It was not until the French revolution that war "... again became the concern of the people as a whole, took on an entirely different character, or rather closely approached its true character, its absolute perfection" (Clausewitz, p. 592).

Sherman's brilliance as a strategist is best understood in this respect. Since his days in the south as commandant of the Louisiana Seminary of Learning and Military Academy, he understood and railed against the proponents of secession. Comprehending that secession would result in civil war, he was moved by what form such a war would take. It would not be the sterile, romantic wars of opposing armies clashing in open fields. It would be

"... folly, madness, a crime against civilization. . . War is a terrible thing. I know you are brave fighting people, but for every day of actual fighting, there are months of marching, exposure and suffering. At best war is a frightful loss of life and property and worse still is the demoralization of the people. Besides where are your men and appliances of war to contend against them. You are bound to fail" (Barrett, p. 10).

This prophetic letter, dated well before the outbreak of war, is remarkable for its foresight and prescience. Written during peacetime by an officer without a day of combat experience, it also indicates how Sherman intended to wage war as an independent commander. Four years later, Sherman was given the opportunity. His philosophy for the campaign is best summed up in his response to Grant, stating "we cannot change the hearts of the people in the South (but) we can make war so terrible that they will realize futility), however brave and gallant and devoted to their country" (McDonough, p. 1).

Many would criticize Sherman's decision to take war to the southern population, generally considered non-combatants in this era. However, Sherman's strategy clearly delineated a campaign of physical destruction against the infrastructure of the south, but only a psychological campaign against the population. Mark Coburn, in Terrible Innocence: General Sherman at War, believes that Sherman set out three goals for the psychological campaign: To show the south its helplessness, to tempt confederate soldiers to desert, and to undermine the will of the south to resist (Coburn, pp 131-132). He believed that this plan of action would not only demoralize noncombatants, but also soldiers in uniform. The armies in the field could be disheartened by attacks on the southern lands as easily as defeats on the battlefield (Bartlett, p. 17). While Sherman's troops were accused of wanton destruction and brutality, in fact their conduct against the population was no better or worse than Union forces fighting in the east. The legends and hatred which exist to this day may in fact, be proof positive of the wisdom of Sherman's strategy.

Recognizing the passion and primordial emotions that are at the heart of civil wars, Sherman focused his campaign against the people with a particular skill unique to American

generals. Unlike his peers, Sherman recognized that the Civil War was not simply a war between opposing governments nor opposing armies, but a war between opposing ideologies, and those ideologies were held firmly in the minds of the entire Southern population. He recognized, as Clausewitz foretold, that "the aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must... conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character" (Clausewitz, p. 594). In taking the war to the land and the civilians of the south, Sherman deduced that "he could make war so terrible that Southerners would exhaust all peaceful remedies before commencing another conflict. While " (they) cannot be made to love us, (they) can be made to fear us and dread the passage of troops through their country"" (Barrett, p 15)

### Sherman and the Government

The second dominant tendency of war identified by Clausewitz is its "...element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone" (Clausewitz, p. 89). Sherman, in his timing of the fall of Atlanta and the subsequent march through the south, clearly understood that this war was not "das Ding an sich ('a thing unto itself') (Brodie in Clausewitz, p. 643), but merely the means by which the nation would achieve the end of reunification. Having failed to maintain the union by measures other than war, Sherman understood that the only remaining method left to reforge the union was in the crucible of war.

While not a "political general" in the sense of unmerited advancement, Sherman had significant political relationships. Growing up as the ward of a United States Senator, brother of a congressman and himself, by association, a member of the political elite. Sherman's actions and efforts throughout the Civil War bespeak an understanding of the war as merely

an instrument towards the policy of reunification. His ability to maintain a focus on the ultimate political objective-- Clausewitz's tendency towards reason in the conduct of war-- was a quality shared among few Civil War generals.

Two examples illustrate Sherman's understanding of the interaction between politics and war. The first was his (apparently) contradictory habit of threatening violent battles but offering generous peace. For a general often vilified in history as brutal and vicious in the conduct of war, Sherman was remarkably generous in victory, more so in acquiescence. His famous letter to John Bell Hood demonstrates this tendency.

On taking Atlanta, Sherman proposed expelling all inhabitants from the city in order to turn the environs into an armed supply base. In his reply, John Bell Hood responded that "the unprecedented measure you propose transcends, in studied and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war" (Coburn, p. 128). Sherman, in his typical "war or peace on my terms" dialectic responded,

"You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. Those who brought war . . . deserve all of the curses and maledictions a people can pour out. Once (you) admit the Union, once more acknowledge the authority of the national government.. I and this Army become at once your protectors and supporter. . Then I will share with you the last cracker, and watch with you to shield your homes and families" (Coburn, p. 129).

In this letter and many more like it, Sherman reveals his broad understanding of war as an instrument of policy. More than any other general of his time, Sherman aggressively and repeatedly linked his operations to the object of reunification. The fall of Atlanta and the election of 1864 provide a second, and particularly telling example of this trait.

By 1864, northern support for the war was waning. General George McClellan had accepted the Democratic nomination, running on an "end the war" platform. To the



Democrats, the war was a failure and the South should be allowed to secede. Lincoln's Republican platform offered little but more war, as the 1863 victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg were not followed by a rapid collapse of the South. Grant's army in the east was mired in siege warfare against Petersburg and Richmond, while Sherman's forces were fighting Joe Johnston's brilliant retreat to Atlanta. Sherman clearly saw the danger of a Democratic victory, and his press on Atlanta served not only the military objective of the key Georgia railways, but the political objective of a Lincoln reelection and continued prosecution of the war. In Sherman's words,

"Success to our arms at that instant was therefore a political necessity; and it was all-important that something startling in our interest should occur before the election in November. The brilliant success at Atlanta filled that requirement, and made the election of Mr. Lincoln certain" (Sherman, p. 110).

In his conduct of military operations and the historical record of his written correspondence, Sherman demonstrates his clear understanding of linking military operations to the policy objectives for which the nation went to war. Like Clausewitz, Sherman understood that "Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. . . (the war) must necessarily bear the character of policy and measure by its standards" (Clausewitz, p. 610).

### Sherman and the Army

The third dominant tendency of Clausewitz's trinity is "the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam (which) depends on the particular character of the commander and the army" (Clausewitz, p. 89). To this corner of the trinity, William Sherman brings the first instance of modern operational maneuver to American military history through his "March to the Sea" and subsequent operations in the Carolinas.

William Sherman was anything but a military genius. By his own admission, he was a poor commander. In comparing himself to Grant, Sherman stated,

"I am more nervous than he is. I am more likely to change my orders than he is..he issues such information as he has according to his best judgment; he issues his orders and does his level best to carry them out without much reference to what is going on about him and, so far, experience seems to have fully justified him" (Glatthaar, p. 139).

Tactically, Sherman's record blemished by significant failures and marginal victories on the battlefields. However, what Sherman did with his army is unlike any other general in the Civil War-- marching them through the interior of the confederacy, north to the Carolinas and in the process achieving operational success by avoiding decisive battle, maneuvering and destroying of the enemy's capability to wage war. In doing so, Sherman massed the poor tactical acumen of his largely volunteer and conscripted army against the center of gravity of the South-- the capability and will to prosecute the war.

There exists significant controversy as to the author of this strategy. Most give credit to Grant, in his well-known order to Sherman to "... move against Johnston's army, to break it up, and to get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources" (Glatthaar, p. 156). However, Grant's method of warfare up to that point, and for the rest of the war, indicates that the focus of his order was on the first requirement-- to defeat Joe Johnston's army. Grant typically sought battle against his opponent's forces, seeing the defeat of the forces as a condition for success. Sherman, by contrast, saw the enemy as merely a cordon protecting the south. Behind the cordon-- the land and the civilians -- was the true objective of Sherman.

The interior of the south was an objective best suited for the "Bummers" of William T. Sherman. Perhaps a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sherman loathed the indiscipline and

incompetence of militia and volunteers. He refused to return to the army in 1861 unless given command of regulars. By 1864, the regulars in his force were a distinct minority. However, his appreciation for the fighting spirit of the confederate soldiers had not abated. For Sherman, this was an army best suited for maneuver, for destruction of the southern infrastructure, not for battle. The prolonged war attrited the few skills the army possessed in 1861-1862. For the army in the west.

"If its morale was bad, the marching was good, and that satisfied Sherman. If he did not teach his soldiers how to fight, he gave them the mobility which the execution of his strategic design required of them...Success justifies all means, and thus Sherman became a great general..without having ever won a battle" (Shanks, p 45).

The second condition for successful maneuver was to free his army from the sinews of war-- his logistics base. Unprecedented in military history, the typical reaction declared

"If Sherman has really left his army in the air....he has either done one of the most brilliant or one of the most foolish things ever performed by a military leader...the plan on which he acts must really place him among the great Generals or the very little ones...(it is certain to result) in the most tremendous disaster that ever befell an armed host (or) the very consummation of the success of sublime audacity" (Lewis, p 457)

The resulting success of his march to the sea and through the Carolinas is due to a great deal upon good fortune, "chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam" (Clausewitz, p. 89). But it is also indicative of Sherman's understanding of the nature and capability of his army, and the context in which they fought. While one would be hard-pressed to fit Sherman into the realm of Clausewitzian military genius, it is difficult to imagine the operational success of this army without the inner light or coup d'oeil of William Sherman.

## Conclusion

The paradoxical trinity of Clausewitz speaks volumes to the nature, purpose and conduct of warfare. Through this pedagogue, war is reduced from absolute, untrammelled violence to a "true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case" (Clausewitz, p. 89). More important, the trinity of the people, the government and the army serve as points of attraction from which real war suspends in balance, adopting the timely qualities of each to determine its particular characteristics.

William T. Sherman, and the military operations of his army in the western theater of operations in 1864-1865, serves as an example of war suspended in the attraction of the Clausewitz's three magnets. Unlike his contemporaries, who attempted to wage war as "a thing unto itself", William Sherman's operations clearly harmonized the political objectives of reunification, exploited the passions of the southern belligerents and leveraged the strengths of a huge volunteer army to create a style of warfare unique to the battlefields of 1860-1865. It was an operational style which serves not only as an illustration of Clausewitz's eccentric "trinity" of war in practice but also as a precursor to the "modern" wars of the 20th century. For these reasons, William T. Sherman and the campaigns of 1864-1865 remain relevant topics of study and understanding for the strategists of the next millennium.

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